Delaware Aims to Protect Citizens' Computers

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DOVER −− David Greene sees them every day: computers so ridden with viruses and spyware that their owners have pulled the plug in disgust.

Greene's company, Secure Data Computer Solutions of Camden, brings the computers back to good health −− but the bad guys are writing new viruses every day, and hackers are busy looking for ways to hijack your e−mail account, your passwords and maybe even your identity.

On Tuesday, the fight against the Internet's bad guys got a new ally: the Delaware Department of Technology and Information, the agency that provides computing services to state government.

Department Secretary Thomas Jarrett and Gov. Ruth Ann Minner unveiled a free subscription based e−mail service to let Delawareans know of developing threats on the Internet −− and how to combat them.

The warnings are similar to alerts provided by several federal agencies and those provided free by Internet security software makers.

Delaware's free alerts will not compete with for-profit businesses; in fact, the alerts could help motivate computer users who do not use computer anti−virus programs to buy them or keep them current.

And state officials said that would help limit the spread of viruses and worms.

"This particular issue touches more than just us in state government. It touches everyone," Jarrett said. "There are a lot of very bad people out there."

The state's service will operate in the same way as Delaware's popular school−closing alert system. The computer service will alert subscribers to threats such as new viruses or worms that can infect computers, as well as to Internet scams and critical software updates released by Microsoft.

Internet users can sign up for the service at the department's Web site, www.dti.delaware.gov, or through the state's main site at www.delaware.gov.

Users who subscribe will receive notifications of new threats and the actions they need to take to protect themselves. Jarrett said subscribers will receive "timely information on how to keep home and business computers as safe as possible."

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The threats posed by viruses and so-called "malware" can range from the annoying −− pop-up ads and changes to browser settings −− to the sinister. Some programs are capable of logging keystrokes and transmitting them to thieves who use them to access bank accounts and other secure sites.

Identity theft on the Web is a growing problem in Delaware and nationwide, although it is barely a blip on the radar screen when compared with credit card or bank fraud.

In 2005, 2.4 percent of all identity thefts reported in Delaware were done through the Internet or

e−mail, according to the Federal Trade Commission.

That was higher than the national average of 1.9 percent −− and an increase from the previous year, when just
1.3 percent of identity thefts reported in Delaware involved the Internet.

The key to Delaware's new e−mail service is information, but Keith DeFrance, who owns The Computer Jocks, a computer repair service in Newark, wonders how effective it will be.

A computer user has to be savvy enough to seek out the service, sign up for it and then act on the alerts, said DeFrance, who has repaired computers whose owners had not taken the basic steps of running anti−virus and firewall programs.

Greene agreed.

"I figure it will have an impact for people that are knowledgeable about computers. There's certainly some savvy people around nowadays, especially because the younger kids have grown up with computers," he said.

The baby boomers and senior citizens who might not be so computer−savvy need to be exposed to this information so they do not fall victim to Internet viruses and scams, said William Pearson, who teaches computer courses for the University of Delaware's Academy of Lifelong Learning.

Pearson said he would spread the word to the academy's participants and tell them, "This is something you need to do."

SIGN UP - Go to www.dti.delaware.gov to sign up for Delaware's free e−mail service to let computer users know of developing threats on the Internet −− and how to combat them.

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